



# ASSISTED HOUSING MANAGEMENT INSIDER®

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## Mold Cleanup—When to Do It Yourself and When to Call in the Experts

The best way to deal with mold is to implement a good preventive maintenance program to stop mold before it starts. But if mold has already been found at your site or if residents are complaining of illnesses that may be mold-related, you need to get rid of the mold as quickly and effectively as possible. With so many apartment sites having been hit with mold-related lawsuits lately, you don't want to risk a hefty legal verdict against your site. Besides, HUD takes the presence of mold at assisted sites very seriously. If HUD inspectors find mold at your site, they can hit you with health and safety and other inspection violations. And these violations can have serious repercussions for your site. If you get cited for mold and don't clean it up right away, you face possible administrative enforcement, which can lead to suspension and debarment from HUD programs.

But who should do the mold cleanup work at your site—your employees or an outside expert? Guidelines issued by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as well as guidelines from New York City's Department of Health, offer some rules of thumb for you to follow. The guidelines recommend when to hire a professional to deal with a mold problem. They also suggest appropriate cleaning methods. Below, we'll tell you what the guidelines say and give you tips on how to choose a mold remediation company if you need one.

### Who Should Do the Work?

The guidelines issued by the EPA and New York City's Department of Health recommend deciding who should handle a mold problem based on the square footage affected by the mold. The guidelines discussed below apply to

most mold problems you'd encounter but don't apply to mold found in the HVAC systems of apartment sites.

**10 square feet of mold or less.** If mold is found only in a small area (10 square feet or less)—say, on ceiling tiles or patches of walls—the guidelines say that your maintenance staff should be able to take care of the problem.

Maintenance staff should wear proper protection when doing the work. This includes using N95 disposable respirators (which can be found in most hardware stores) and wearing gloves and goggles.

The actual work area should be unoccupied, the guidelines say. But there's no need to move people out of the adjacent spaces unless they're particularly at risk, like infants or people with serious medical conditions or immune deficiency problems.

Your staff should place any mold-covered material they find in a sealed plastic bag. And when finished, they should wipe the work areas clean. They should also wipe clean any pathways they've walked on during the cleanup.

**10–30 square feet of mold.** If mold is found in this amount of space—covering one or two entire wallboard panels, for example—the guidelines say that your maintenance staff should still be able to take care of the problem. The recommended precautions are identical to those above, with these additional recommendations:

- Cover the work area with a plastic sheet and seal the sheet with tape to contain the dust before starting the mold cleanup; and

- Vacuum the work area and paths taken by staff with a vacuum containing a HEPA filter.

**30–100 square feet of mold.** If mold is found in this amount of space—say, for example, several entire panels of wallboard are covered with mold—the guidelines say that although you can try to have your maintenance staff fix the problem, it's smarter to call in the experts.

If you choose to have your staff remove the mold, the recommended procedures to follow are identical to those for 10–30 square feet of mold, with these additional recommendations:

- Use plastic sheeting to seal off ventilation ducts or grills in the work area and to seal off the area immediately adjacent to it;
- Make sure that not only the work area but the area immediately adjacent to it is unoccupied while the work is being done; and
- If you expect to generate a lot of dust while taking care of the mold problem (for example, if you must knock down plaster walls), follow the procedures explained below for 100 or more square feet of mold—including hiring a professional to fix the problem.

**100 or more square feet of mold.** If mold is found in this amount of space—say, the wallboard in an entire room is covered with mold—the guidelines say you should hire a professional mold remediation company to combat the problem. This amount of mold would be too much for your maintenance staff alone to deal with safely.

## How to Get Rid of Mold

In addition to giving you information about when to hire a professional to take care of a mold problem, the guidelines also give recommendations on how to remove mold. According to the guidelines, the first thing you should do when faced with a mold problem is locate and get rid of the source of moisture or humidity that's causing the problem. Then try to get rid of the mold itself. The EPA guidance contains a handy chart that spells out the recommended cleaning methods for a number of different surfaces (including paper, wallpaper, carpet, concrete, and wood) based on the extent of mold growth. In most cases, the area can be cleaned using either a wet vacuum or a vacuum with a HEPA filter; and some hard, nonporous surfaces require only a damp wipe and scrub if necessary.

If the mold is on a nonporous surface, like metal or glass, or on a semiporous surface, like wood or concrete, tell your staff to clean up the mold with a sponge or cloth soaked in soapy water. Use a mild detergent solution, advises Wes Carlton, vice president of MBA Technologies, a forensic indoor air quality testing firm. Any household dish detergent will do. If the mold is on a porous surface, like ceiling tile or wallboard, and there's more than a small patch of mold on it, tell your staff to remove the ceiling tile or wallboard and replace it.

According to Carlton, some people may assume they've gotten rid of a mold problem simply by killing it—by pouring bleach on it, for example. But this isn't true, he says. Dead mold can also cause allergic symptoms. So when dealing with a mold problem, you must make sure that the visible mold, whether living or dead, is removed from the area.

**AHMI Says:** To learn more about the recommended standards of mold cleanup discussed in this article, you can go to the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site, [www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/index.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/index.html), or to the New York City Department of Health's Web site, <http://NYC.gov/html/doh/html/epi/moldrpt1.html>.

## How to Choose a Mold Remediator

If your mold problem is too big for your maintenance staff to handle, you'll need to find a company that can do the mold cleanup for you—a mold remediation company or mold remediator. But ask questions before hiring such a company. Since mold has become a "hot" topic, many firms have sprung up to take care of mold problems—some qualified, some not.

So before hiring a mold remediator, check these two things:

**Certification.** Make sure the company is either a Certified Industrial Hygienist or a Certified Mold Remediator. The American Industrial Hygiene Association maintains a list of all certified industrial hygienists on its Web site at [www.aiha.org](http://www.aiha.org).

**References.** Do a thorough background check on the company you're thinking about hiring, including a check on its credit and insurance coverage, says Carlton. You should also ask for three or four references to see how the

### Preventive Maintenance Is Key to Mold Control

To prevent mold from growing in the first place or to keep it from reappearing once you get rid of it, experts say the best strategy is to set up a preventive maintenance program. Your program should be designed to help you locate, reduce, and eliminate the sources of mold—by preventing, inspecting for, and cleaning up leaks, standing water, and other elevated moisture conditions, says David W. Bearg, an indoor air quality consultant. This includes taking such steps as setting up a water leak hotline for your residents to report leaks, promptly mopping up water, replacing wet carpeting, and keeping the site's humidity level in check.

For more information on this type of program, and steps you can take to control mold growth at your site, see, "Avoid HUD Violations, Harm to Residents by Eliminating Mold," *AHMI*, Dec. 2001, p. 1.

company solved other sites' mold problems. Mold can create huge public relations headaches for apartment sites, Carlton points out. You don't want a mold remediator whose workers just come into your site, wearing protective suits, and scare your residents. You need to find out how the company's workers talk to residents and what they plan to do to allay residents' fears while working at your site, he adds.

**AHMI Says:** If you think you need to have your site tested for mold, don't use the same company to test for mold and then to fix the problem if one is found, advises Carlton. This way, you prevent a company from saying you have a mold problem just so it can get more business by telling you it can also fix the problem, he explains. It's better to be up front and tell whomever you hire to test for mold that you'll be hiring someone else to fix the problem, Carlton says. 🏠

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#### AHMI SOURCES

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### Do You Need to Test for Mold at Your Site?

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Some owners and managers may wonder whether, in addition to implementing a mold prevention and maintenance program, it's a good idea to have their site tested for mold as an extra precaution. This test normally involves sampling the air for mold spores. But according to Wes Carlton of MBA Technologies, mold testing should be done only in very limited circumstances. That's because the best and most accurate test for mold is a visual one, he explains. You know you have mold if you see it growing on tiles or wallboard. So there's no point in spending money on testing for mold when you already know you have a mold problem because you've seen it, Carlton says.

But mold testing is appropriate in certain circumstances, says Carlton. For example, if residents start getting sick for no apparent reason and you neither see mold nor detect a moldy smell, then you should have mold testing done, he explains. According to the New York City Department of Health guidelines, you may also need to have testing done if you think mold has gotten into your ventilation system and you need to find out how much of your site has been affected.